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Charicleia the Martyr: Heliodorus and Early Christian Narrative¹

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Since the early twentieth century, scholars have noted that the Christian Apocryphal Acts bear a striking thematic and narrative resemblance to the ancient Greek novels.² The pervasive similarities and parallels between the two are not surprising given that not only do both feature the same geographic and cultural context – the late antique Hellenic world – but also that both *corpora* reveal as well as examine the social concerns of the period for a particular audience: the novel for urban élites, and the Apocrypha for the emerging Christians.³ Both were often presumed to have had a predominantly female readership due to the unprecedented role women play in their narratives.⁴ It is generally assumed that the Apocryphal Acts were most probably influenced by the ancient Greek novel, since the writers of these (later) Christian texts appear to have adopted and applied novelistic *topoi* and themes, as well as rhetorical techniques.⁵ Recent scholarship on the intersec-

¹ I would like to thank Froma Zeitlin for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful to Scott F. Johnson as well as to the audience present at the ‘Ancient Novel and Early Christian Narrative: Intersections’ panel at ICAN IV.

² Von Dobschütz 1902, Söder 1932. Pervo 1994, 244 emphasizes that the resemblances between the Apocryphal Acts and the novel are ‘quite apparent’, especially ‘in the accounts of threatened chastity and its preservation’.

³ Perkins 1994, 42 argues that the ancient romance functioned as a crucial means ‘through which the Greek urban elite in the early years of the Roman empire created and maintained their identity’. See also Cooper 1996.

⁴ For readership on the novel, see Egger 1988, Bowie 1994, and Stephens 1994. For the Apocryphal Acts, Burrus 1987.

⁵ Taking for granted the influence of the Greek Novel on the Apocrypha, Johnson 2006a, 190 is able to claim that the Greek Saints’ Lives, written in the fourth to sixth centuries CE, inherited the literary techniques of the Greek novel through the mediation of the second- to fourth-century Apocryphal Acts.

tion between the Apocryphal Acts and the novel has focused in particular on the way in which the former deviates from and even ‘subverts’ the latter; the work of Judith Perkins and Kate Cooper has specifically discussed, for example, how the Apocryphal Acts, which feature stories of upper-class women who renounce marriage in order to follow the apostle’s teaching, ‘borrow from and invert the ideology of *eros*’ found in the novel.⁶

This essay continues the productive practice of reading the Greek novel and the Apocryphal Acts in relation to one another, but I seek to complicate the uni-linear model of Acts borrowing from or reacting to the novel by exploring one particular instance in which the direction of influence is reversed. I argue that Heliodorus, in constructing and presenting his remarkable heroine Charicleia, draws from a second-century early Christian work that also intensely focuses on its female protagonist, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*ATH*). Writing in either the third or fourth century CE,⁷ Heliodorus evokes Thecla, the most celebrated early Christian saint and proto-martyr,⁸ in two specific ‘trial scenes’ in which the heroine is depicted as a spectacle before an emotive crowd: Charicleia’s near-burning at Memphis, and her final recognition at Meroë. In these moments, Heliodorus goes beyond previous novelistic attempts to engage and entice the viewer’s gaze in order to highlight his heroine’s beauty. He increasingly draws attention to Charicleia’s purity and chastity in a manner that is consistent with the early Christian hagiography related to Thecla. In other novels, the beauty of the heroines renders them objects of desire both within and outside their respective narratives: their beauty arouses a yearning for erotic possession in male characters, while simultaneously creating and adding to the aesthetic pleasure of the novel for its readers. Charicleia’s physical person is instead de-

⁶ Cooper 1996, 46. For the specific case of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, see Aubin 1998.

⁷ Though Heliodorus has been recognized for his elaborate narrative technique, the exact date of when he lived and wrote still remains a mystery to scholars. Many believe that he wrote in either the third or fourth century CE. For a fuller discussion concerning the possible dates of the *Aethiopica*’s composition, see Morgan 1996, 417-421, and Bowersock 1994, 149-160.

⁸ Thecla also enjoyed a great afterlife beyond the text of the Apocryphal *Acts*: Methodius honors her by naming her the leader of the chorus of virgins in his third-century CE *Symposium*. In the fourth century, both Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa praise her for her virginity and include her as the only female witness in a list of early Christian apostolic martyrs. Gregory of Nazianzus in fact retreated to Thecla’s shrine at Seleuceia following the death of his father in 374: *πρῶτον μὲν ἦλθον εἰς Σελεύκειαν φυγὰς, / τὸν παρθενῶνα τῆς αἰοδίου κόρης / Θέκλας* (*de vita sua* 547-549). See Davis 2001 for a full treatment of the influence of Thecla, including a discussion of the significant material remains of her cult throughout the Mediterranean.

scribed in terms that are refulgent, rather than sexual, ultimately testifying to her chastity. Like Thecla, she is not the typical object of the collective vicarious gaze of the male protagonist and the reader, which is arguably the case for the heroines of the other Greek novels. By considering the aesthetic representation of the heroines of the Apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and of the *Aethiopica* alongside one another, I examine the possibility of the reception and adaptation of an early Christian narrative into Greek literature.

For a work that is otherwise scant on physical description,⁹ the *ATH* surprisingly draws attention to Thecla's beauty at the two trial scenes in which she is presented as a spectacle to a crowd about to witness her death. Thecla's first major trial is brought about as a direct result of her unconventional reaction to Paul and his teachings on chastity, particularly her overnight visit to the apostle's prison. Having been denounced by her mother Theocleia before all as a lawless, unwedded creature (ἄνομον, ἄνυμφον),¹⁰ Thecla is to be burned to death in the theatre as a warning example to all other women who might dare act in a similar fashion. Though the trial scene focuses on the miracle that God achieves in order to save the pious Thecla, her nude body nonetheless receives special attention:

Οἱ δὲ παῖδες καὶ αἱ παρθένοι ἤνεγκαν ξύλα καὶ χόρτον ἵνα Θέκλα κατακαῇ. ὥς δὲ εἰσῆλθῃ γυμνή, ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ ἡγεμὼν καὶ ἐθαύμασεν τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ δύναμιν. ἔστρωσαν δὲ τὰ ξύλα καὶ ἐκέλευσαν αὐτὴν οἱ δῆμιοι ἐπιβῆναι τῇ πυρᾷ· ἡ δὲ τὸν τύπον τοῦ σταυροῦ ποιησαμένη ἐπέβη τῶν ξύλων· οἱ δὲ ὕψησαν. καὶ μεγάλου πυρὸς λάμπαντος οὐχ ἦψατο αὐτῆς τὸ πῦρ· ὁ γὰρ θεὸς σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἦχον ὑπόγειον ἐποίησεν, καὶ νεφέλη ἄνωθεν ἐπεσκίασεν ὕδατος πλήρης καὶ χαλάζης, καὶ ἐξεχύθη πᾶν τὸ κύτος, ὥς πολλοὺς κινδυνεύσαι καὶ ἀποθανεῖν, καὶ τὸ πῦρ σβεσθῆναι τὴν δὲ Θέκλαν σωθῆναι.¹¹ *ATH* 22

⁹ The only extended description in the text is that of Paul. At the beginning of the narrative he is described as 'small in size, bald-headed, bowlegged, healthy, with a unibrow, rather big-nosed, full of grace. At times he seemed like a man, other times he had the face of an angel' (μικρὸν τῷ μεγέθει, ψιλὸν τῇ κεφαλῇ, ἀγκύλον ταῖς κνήμαις, εὐεκτικόν, σύνοφρον, μικρῶς ἐπίρρινον, χάριτος πλήρη· ποτὲ μὲν γὰρ ἐφαίνετο ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ποτὲ δὲ ἀγγέλου πρόσωπον εἶχεν, *ATH* 3). Bollók 1996, 1 documents and discusses these 'eight external features of the apostle', a description that is 'unparalleled in ancient Christian literature'.

¹⁰ *ATH* 20: Κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνομον, κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνυμφον ἐν μέσῳ θεάτρων, ἵνα πᾶσαι αἱ ὑπὸ τοῦτου διδασκείσαι γυναῖκες φοβηθῶσιν.

¹¹ The text is that of R. A. Lipsius, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1972).

The boys and girls brought wood and straw so that Thecla might be burned. And when she was led in naked the governor wept and marveled at the power that was in her. And the executioners arranged the wood and ordered her to climb the pyre. And having made the sign of the cross she climbed the pyre. And they lighted the fire. As the great fire was blazing it did not touch her. For God, having mercy upon her, made an underground rumbling, and a cloud full of water and hail overshadowed [the theatre] from above, and all its contents were poured out so that many were in danger and died. And the fire was extinguished and Thecla saved.¹²

The sight of Thecla's nudity is disarming, possessing the ability to affect the governor of the town to so great an extent that it causes him to weep. The heroine, on display before all, is in no way an erotic figure that inspires desire from the most powerful man who watches her, as is often the case in the Greek novel. Instead, the writer of the Acts utilizes the governor's nonsexual response to her nude body as an opportunity to illustrate her power and bravery, qualities which are more fitting for an early Christian heroine.¹³ Though the trial scene itself does not directly comment on her beauty, Thecla's meeting with Paul following this miraculous rescue introduces the theme and the problem of her comeliness. Once the apostle and his followers rejoice at the fact that she is alive, Thecla expresses a desire to follow Paul, stating that she is willing to masculinize her appearance by cutting her hair in order to do so. Paul, however, denies this request, on the basis that 'times are bad, and you are beautiful' (Ὁ καιρὸς αἰσχρὸς, καὶ σὺ εὐμορφος, *ATH* 25). Paul's response focuses on her physical form rather than the faith she had demonstrated in the trial scene. Unlike the governor, Paul cannot see the link between Thecla's body and her piety. He refuses to baptize Thecla, an act some critics have interpreted as 'designed to produce frustration in the eyes of the reader, who has just observed Thecla's endurance alone in the face of death for the sake of her new-found faith'.¹⁴

Paul's response underlines the necessity of a second trial scene that will once again establish Thecla's worthiness. The second trial scene in the *ATH* goes beyond the previous scene in detailing the involvement of the watching crowd, and once again stages the unconventional reaction of a powerful male to Thecla's physical body. In direct contrast to the straightforward scene in

¹² All *ATH* translations are my own.

¹³ Bremmer 1996a, 49 considers this a 'strong narrative ploy'.

¹⁴ Aubin 1998, 266-267.

Ath 22, the scene in *Ath* 27-38 contains the aretalogical elements that typically characterize martyr accounts, such as acclamations, amazement of a crowd of witnesses, and the miracles that accompany such moments.¹⁵ Thecla, now charged with sacrilege for refusing the advances of a prominent citizen and attacking him, elicits the compassion not just of the governor, but also of the entire crowd in attendance:

Τότε εἰσβάλλουσιν πολλὰ θηρία, ἐστώσης αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκτετακυίας τὰς χεῖρας καὶ προσευχομένης. ὥς δὲ ἐτέλεσεν τὴν προσευχήν, ἐστράφη καὶ εἶδεν ὄρυγμα μέγα πλήρες ὕδατος, καὶ εἶπεν Νῦν καιρὸς λούσασθαι με. καὶ ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν λέγουσα Ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι. Καὶ ἰδοῦσαι αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἔκλαυσαν λέγοντες Μὴ βάλης ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ, ὥστε καὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα δακρῦσαι, ὅτι τοιοῦτον κάλλος φῶκαι ἔμελλον ἐσθίειν. ἡ μὲν οὖν ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ· αἱ δὲ φῶκαι πυρὸς ἀστραπῆς φέγγος ἰδοῦσαι νεκραὶ ἐπέπλευσαν. καὶ ἦν περὶ αὐτὴν νεφέλη πυρὸς, ὥστε μήτε τὰ θηρία ἄπτεσθαι αὐτῆς, μήτε θεωρεῖσθαι αὐτὴν γυμνήν. *Ath* 34

Then they sent in various beasts while she was standing and extending her hands and praying. And when she finished her prayer, she turned around and saw a large pit full of water, and she said ‘Now is the time to wash myself’. And she threw herself in, saying, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself on my last day.’ The women saw this and the entire crowd shouted saying ‘Do not throw yourself into the water!’ and the governor wept, because the seals were about to devour such beauty. She then threw herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ. But the seals, having seen a flash of lightning, became floating corpses. And around her there was a cloud of fire, so that the beasts could not touch her, nor could she be seen naked.

In this elaborate scene, the crowd does not see Thecla as a dehumanized subject, and in fact actively calls out so as to prevent her death. Just as Thecla’s nudity and bravery induced the governor of Iconium to weep in the previous scene, here the governor of Antioch also weeps as she leaps into a pit of seals in order to baptize herself. Now a reason is given for the governor’s tears, the beauty (κάλλος) of Thecla. The governor’s response once again establishes a link between her physical form and her piety; it is crucial

¹⁵ See Merkelbach 1994 for a useful outline of the typical characteristics of aretalogies.

that she appears to him ‘as a spectacle of beauty’.¹⁶ As in the previous scene, she is naked, but this time a cloud of fire protects her from the gaze of the spectators, perhaps pointing out that she is now clothed in baptism. In this way, the text draws attention to her physical body while indicating the protection that she has received in baptism against the potentially lascivious gaze of a crowd.

Death in the arena constituted an important type of public spectacle that frequently dehumanized and objectified transgressors. The watching audience expected a major spectacle, filled with the screams of those condemned.¹⁷ In these two scenes, Thecla defies generic expectation, as she faces death willingly. Presented as a spectacle before a watching audience, her comely appearance elicits the concern of others during these major trials and serves as proof of her chastity and piety. The beauty of Thecla does not play as prominent a role in the narrative as that of the heroines in the Greek novels, yet it is nonetheless showcased in a public arena and commented upon by those watching. In these moments the narrator draws attention to her face and figure as a way of enhancing her piety instead of creating desire. The fact that she is not objectified speaks to the construction of Thecla as an autonomous and anomalous figure. Compared to the women typically featured in the Apocryphal Acts, she already stands out: throughout the narrative, Thecla is more than a mere object of conversion, as she herself is condemned for her radical behavior. I would like to propose that her beauty is yet another characteristic feature of the early martyr, upon which a watching audience focuses, and which it interprets as further proof of her piety.

Unlike Thecla, whose beauty is a vehicle to her power and piety, the titillating beauty of the heroines of the Greek novel functions to dazzle internal and external audiences, both characters and readers. Though narrators describe their beauty as god-like, or else compare them directly to a goddess, more often their attractiveness is conveyed through the impact on and reaction of others around them. The most prominent example is Chariton’s Callirhoe, whose ‘beauty was not human but divine, not like that of a Nereid or a Nymph but rather that of the virgin Aphrodite herself’.¹⁸ Throughout the

¹⁶ Calef 2006, 177.

¹⁷ Potter 1993, 55: the audience typically ‘expected to see penitence and terror in the condemned, they expected to hear them scream, and they expected to see the terror in their faces as they confronted the beasts or the other savage forms of execution which were employed in the arena’.

¹⁸ Chariton 1.1.1: ἦν γὰρ τὸ κάλλος οὐκ ἀνθρώπινον ἀλλὰ θεῖον, οὐδὲ Νηρηίδος ἢ Νύμφης τῶν ὀρειῶν ἀλλ’ αὐτῆς Ἀφροδίτης [παρθένου]. On Callirhoe’s beauty and approximation to Aphrodite, see Zeitlin 2003 and Schmeling 2005.

novel, Chariton charts the impact she has on various men through a series of scenes centered around the physical sight of his heroine. Froma Zeitlin speaks of such moments as ‘public feasts for the eye’, which may border on the epiphanic but nonetheless speak to the author’s desire to display his heroine before a desirous audience.¹⁹ As in classical Hollywood cinema, where feminist film critics have deconstructed the (male) erotic tendency of looking at a (female) spectacle onscreen, the women of the Greek novel are continuously presented as ‘isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized’.²⁰ Their beauty confirms them as figures worthy of erotic possession, objects of sexual stimulation through sight.

Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica* contains four major scenes in which Charicleia serves as primary spectacle: the novel’s opening in Egypt, the procession at Delphi in book 2, Charicleia’s near-burning at Memphis in book 8, and the final recognition at Meroë in book 10. These scenes, which reveal a continual and directed spotlight on Charicleia at critical junctures in the narrative, highlight the novel’s incessant concern with its enigmatic heroine. Yet, in the moments in which she is showcased, Heliodorus often avoids direct description of Charicleia; as John Morgan has noted, the author instead conveys her beauty through the reaction of a third party, which creates a distancing effect.²¹ The first two scenes are told through the mediation of others: in book 1, through the uninformed perspective of the group of *boukoloι*, and in the retelling by the Egyptian priest Calasiris in book 2, who recounts Charicleia’s and Theagenes’ first encounter at Delphi to the impressionable Cnemon. Both perspectives, though they stem from sources familiar and unfamiliar with Charicleia, share a similarity of language and presentation. In these moments both parties ascribe her beauty to the divine, often employing direct comparisons to a statue of a goddess, and both evoke luminescent imagery.²² To the *boukoloι* looking from the mountain, she specifically appears as a goddess – either Artemis or Isis, or even a frenzied priestess.²³ Calasiris’ report to the over-eager Cnemon contains various references to her

¹⁹ Zeitlin 2003, 78.

²⁰ Mulvey 1975, 591.

²¹ Morgan 1991, 87, n9.

²² Cf. Heliod. 1,2,5-6; 2,30,6; 2,33,3. All *Aethiopica* citations refer to the Budé text, 2nd edition, of R.M. Rattenbury and T. W. Lumb. *Héliodore. Les Éthiopiennes (Théagène et Chariclée)*, 3 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960).

²³ Heliod. 1,2,6: οἱ μὲν γὰρ θεὸν τινα ἔλεγον, καὶ θεὸν Ἀρτεμιν ἢ τὴν ἐγχώριον Ἴσιν, οἱ δὲ ἱέρειαν ὑπὸ τοῦ θεῶν ἐκμεμηνυῖαν καὶ τὸν ὀρώμενον πολλὸν φόνον ἐργασαμένην.

divine beauty as a young child.²⁴ At Delphi, she is a spectacle; both Greeks and foreigners cannot stop looking at her in public, her beauty so surpasses all else. She is described in terms that present her as a statue of ideal beauty: ἀρχέτυπον ἄγαλμα (2,33,3). These scenes, which are conveyed via the perspectives and even thought processes of others, are furthermore replete with the language of the theatre and emphasize Heliodorus' proclivity for introducing Charicleia as a spectacle, a sight to be marvelled at, like the other Greek heroines.

Books 8 and 10 mark a departure in Heliodorus' presentation of Charicleia. Our heroine is once again 'on stage' at Memphis in Book 8, when she is condemned to die at the stake. Charicleia would have been subject to a more cruel execution, but the tribunal had decided death by fire on account of her youth and irresistible beauty (τὸ νέον τε καὶ ἄμαχον τῆς ὥρας, 8,9,9). Tied to a stake set up outside the city walls, Charicleia is once more displayed as a spectacle before a crowd, which includes Arsace, who is signalled as θεωρὸς (8,9,10). Once on the pyre, she declares her innocence; she proceeds to dramatically invoke various deities, and formally denounces Arsace before the mob. Charicleia then returns voluntarily to the pyre, placing herself at the very center, where she stands valiant and ready for her death (8,9,13). Yet as the guards set the pyre alight, a miracle occurs – the flames of the fire fail to burn Charicleia, but rather flow around her, creating a fiery frame for her beauty, which further highlights her purity. Instead of destroying her, the fire illuminates her: 'the flames only served to illuminate her and make her conspicuous; and her beauty shone forth in the bright glare of the blaze, so that she seemed like a bride in a nuptial chamber of fire' (περιαυγάζεσθαι μόνον καὶ διοπτρεύεσθαι παρέχοντος ἐπιφαιδρυνομένην ἐκ τοῦ περιαιγύσματος τὸ κάλλος καὶ οἶον ἐν πυρίνῳ θαλάμῳ νυμφευομένην, 8,9,13).²⁵ Enveloped in language as luminous as the fire that surrounds her, Charicleia thus becomes a striking apparition, one with a divine-like ability to resist the fire. The flames serve purely to showcase her beauty and her physical person, and are taken as proof of her innocence by those watching. The reaction of the crowd is extraordinary, as all the spectators aggressively

²⁴ For example, Heliod. 2,30,6: 'Ἐπειδὴ δέ μοι ὁμώμοστο ὡς ἐκεῖνος ἐπέσκηπτεν, ἄγει με παρ' ἑαυτὸν καὶ δείκνυσι κόρην ἀμήχανόν τι καὶ δαιμόνιον κάλλος, ἦν αὐτὸς μὲν ἐπὶ τὰ ἔτη γεγονέναι ἔλεγεν ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ ὥρα γάμου πλησιάζειν ἐφάκει, οὕτως ἄρα κάλλους ὑπερβολὴ καὶ εἰς μεγέθους ἔμφασιν φέρει προσθήκη. Κἀγὼ μὲν ἀχανὴς εἰστήκειν ἀγνοίᾳ τε τῶν γινομένων καὶ ἀκορέστῳ θῆα τῶν ὄρων.

²⁵ All *Aethiopica* translations are by John Morgan, based on the edition of Sir Walter Lamb, *Heliodorus Ethiopian Story* (London, Everyman Library, 1997), with occasional modifications.

clamor for her release.²⁶ In this scene, Heliodorus not only diverges from his usual manner of representing Charicleia, as woman approximating a goddess, but, importantly, he chooses to present our heroine to the reader without the mediation of a secondary perspective, unlike the scenes mentioned above. Heliodorus, however, incorporates a crowd of witnesses, a key element of aretalogies, into the narrative and vigorously weaves their every reaction into the events that unfold before them, thus providing cues for the reader that ultimately color our perception of Charicleia. Heliodorus thus constructs a much more elaborate version of the relationship between female beauty and the spectacular, found in a more compact form in the *ATH*.

Comparison of Charicleia to a virgin bride in a chamber of flame, then, constitutes a powerful visual epiphany that awes the crowd. What is particularly striking, as Morgan has pointed out, is that this is ‘the first real *θαλάμος* that Charicleia has ever had’.²⁷ This simile, which positions Charicleia in a fiery bridal chamber, seemingly functions to remind us of her virginity and by extension her purity and innocence. Now the same notion of fire as *thamos* appears only in one other place, in a rewritten version of the *ATH* from 470 CE. A certain Basil, a priest of Seleuceia, decided to rewrite the entire text in highly literary Attic Greek; his more elaborate version, *The Life and Miracles of Thecla*, considered by one scholar as ‘the prime example of the continuity and vitality of novelistic writing in late antique Christianity’,²⁸ is ten times the length of the original *ATH*. In this work, at the very scene when Thecla is condemned to die by fire, the pyre itself is described as a bridal chamber (*θάλαμος*) rather than a furnace (*κάμινος*) for the virgin (1,12,58-59). As soon as Thecla throws herself into the pyre after assuming a cross-like position, the fire literally forgets its own nature and instead adopts the protective elements of a *thamos*, shielding her nakedness from the crowd:

“Ὅθεν καὶ τὸ πῦρ, τῆς ἑαυτοῦ φύσεως ἐκλαθόμενον, αἰδοῖ καὶ φόβῳ τοῦ σταυροῦ, θάλαμος μᾶλλον ἢ κάμινος ἐγένετο τῇ παρθένῳ, οὐδὲ τοῦτο τοῖς θεωμένοις παρασχόν, τὸ γυμνὴν τὴν Θέκλαν ἰδεῖν· καὶ γὰρ ὑψωθὲν καὶ περικυρτωθὲν καὶ ἀποτειχίσαν πάντοθεν τοῖς ἀκολάστοις τὴν θέαν, κοιτωνίσκου μᾶλλον ἢ περ πυρὸς ἐπλήρωσε χρεῖαν.”²⁹ 1,12,57-62

²⁶ As Woronoff 1992, 34 notes, ‘Devant ce miracle, la foule gronde et le spectacle se transforme en manifestation’.

²⁷ Morgan 1998, 71.

²⁸ Johnson 2006b, 194.

²⁹ The text is that of G. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle*, *Subsidia hagiographica* 62, 168-412 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978).

Then the fire, forgetful of its nature, in shame and fear of the cross, became a marriage bed rather than a furnace for the virgin, preventing the spectators from seeing Thecla naked. For from above, around her and on all sides it protected her from the licentious gaze of the spectators. It performed the role of a protective cover rather than fire.

In covering Thecla's nudity, the fire further highlights her body, and by extension her inviolability. What is most remarkable about this scene is that the need to preserve Thecla's inviolability is so great that the fire itself is given agency and emotion. I draw attention to this late text, an adaptation by a devotee of Thecla the saint, in order to illustrate that the image of chaste bride on a pyre was part of the nexus of images associated with Thecla the character.³⁰ In fact, the end of this particular scene, when the narrator tells of a deluge that destroys the people of Iconium, the text concludes that Thecla herself appeared to be fire: τὴν δὲ παρθένον καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ δοκοῦντος εἶναι πυρὸς ἡλευθέρωσεν (1,12,69). Charicleia similarly appears to be made of fire, as she stands framed by the flames, which highlight her miraculous radiant beauty. In the scene at Meroë Heliodorus departs from his normal discourse of beauty, where his protagonist is likened to a goddess, but instead conveys a visual image of Charicleia powerfully reminiscent to those employed by Christian hagiography associated with Thecla.

The book's last scene at the Ethiopian victory festival, which is also full of the motifs of aretology, continues in this vein.³¹ Both Charicleia and Theagenes are to be sacrificed as the first-fruits of war in accordance with an Ethiopian custom, but their virginity must be proved by standing and staying on a gridiron, an *eschara*, in order to be deemed worthy for the Ethiopian sun and moon gods. The crowd expresses intense astonishment when Theagenes is proved to be chaste. When it is Charicleia's turn, however, her beauty takes center stage:

τὴν τε κόμην ἀνεῖσα καὶ οἶον κάτοχος φανεῖσα προσέδραμέ τε καὶ ἐφήλατο τῇ ἐσχάρᾳ καὶ εἰστήκει πολὺν χρόνον ἀπαθῆς, τῷ τε κάλλει τότε πλεον ἐκλάμποντι καταστράπτουσα, περίοπτος ἐφ' ὕψηλοῦ πᾶσι

³⁰ It is also possible that Basil may have read and been in turn influenced by Heliodorus as he rewrote the *ATH*. Whatever the lines of influence may be, the evidence found in this later text confirms that readers may have been aware of an interplay between Thecla and Charicleia.

³¹ Merkelbach 1994, 288.

γεγεννημένη, καὶ πρὸς τοῦ σχήματος τῆς στολῆς ἀγάλματι θεοῦ πλέον ἢ θνητῇ γυναικὶ προσεικαζομένη. 10,9,3

She loosed her hair and, like one possessed, ran forward and leapt upon the brazier. For a long time she stood there unharmed, flashing forth then the light of her beauty in yet greater brightness; observed by all on every side of that high position, and resembling in her attire rather a statue of a deity than a mortal woman.

In other words, the episode of the gridiron once again functions as a place in which to emphasize and conspicuously display the beauty and purity of Charicleia. Once again, the crowd expresses intense astonishment at this visual epiphany of Charicleia:

Θάμβος γοῦν ἅμα πάντας κατέσχε· καὶ βοὴν μίαν ἄσημον μὲν καὶ ἄναρθρον δηλωτικὴν δὲ τοῦ θαύματος ἐπήχησαν τῶν τε ἄλλων ἀγασθέντες καὶ πλέον ὅτι κάλλος οὕτως ὑπεράνθρωπον καὶ τὸ ὥριον τῆς ἀκμῆς ἄθικτον ἐτήρει καὶ ἔχειν ἐνεδείκνυτο σωφροσύνη πλέον ἢ τῇ ὥρᾳ κοσμούμενον. 10,9,4

Amazement, in fact, took hold of everyone at once; they all raised a resounding outcry, confused and inarticulate, but expressive of the wonder and admiration with which they were filled by the scene, and more particularly by the fact that she could keep unsullied, and manifestly then possessed such superhuman beauty and the perfect bloom of her youth, enhanced as it was by her modest reserve more than by her charms.

It is precisely the undefiled (ἄθικτον) nature of her beauty that produces amazement; her beauty, which might otherwise inspire erotic and sexual attention, instead visibly testifies to her σωφροσύνη. Here, as in book 8, we witness a surprising shift in the discourse of what normally constitutes eroticism. Although Charicleia certainly connotes what Laura Mulvey terms a ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ in these two scenes,³² she is consistently presented as a desexualized erotic object, unlike the heroines of other Greek novels.

Scholars have previously explained the presence of the religious elements in Charicleia’s portrayal as a function of the novel’s larger interest in

³² Mulvey 1975, 589: ‘In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*’.

religion and religious life.³³ Yet in these two scenes Heliodorus specifically evokes Thecla inasmuch as she is also presented as a spectacle of beauty but never as an object of desire. In keeping beauty and desire completely separate Heliodorus appears to follow the model set forth by the *ATH*.³⁴ Particularly in a novel where chastity is more than a female qualification for marriage, and assigned more prominence than in any of the other ancient novels,³⁵ such a concern for separating the two may account for the unusual ambivalence towards sex throughout the narrative and especially at the close of the novel, when we expect ἕρωτες δίκαιοι <καὶ> νόμιμοι γάμοι³⁶ instead of the marriage/priesthood consecration that we see. Equally important, this shows that the Greek novel may have been able to draw upon and engage more broadly and deeply with early Christian material beyond the typical tortured body, in this particular case with regards to the critical treatment and construction of beauty.

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³³ Edsall 2000-2001, 121 argues that 'religious narratives cluster around Charikleia's portrayal', and that her description is 'rich in details from religious life because of her transformation from the priestess of Delphic Artemis into the priestess of the Moon in Ethiopia'. Her argument follows that of Hani 1978, who believes the *Aethiopica* to be a 'sacerdotal novel', where the two geographic poles of the novel are located on a vertical line, cities which are both directly or indirectly consecrated to the Sun-God: Delphi at one extreme in the north, and Meroë located in the farthest south. According to Hani 1978, 271, Charikleia's love also does not deviate from this 'sacred' line: 'l'amour de Charikleia né dans un temple (Delphes) est finalement couronné dans un temple (Meroë) par le mariage et la prêtrise'.

³⁴ I do not wish to suggest Thecla is the only model upon which Heliodorus draws; other scholars, for example Whitmarsh 1999, 22, have rightly proposed that Penelope was an important paradigm and predecessor for Charikleia, as was Andromeda and even Odysseus. I merely point out that Thecla is critical to Heliodorus' treatment of beauty and chastity.

³⁵ As Haynes 2003, 70 comments, 'the most striking difference between Heliodorus' conception of chastity, and those favoured by the earlier novelists, is perhaps the manner in which the idea of chastity is elevated to a new level of spiritual purity and allowed to permeate the whole text'.

³⁶ Chariton, *Callirhoe* 8,1,4.

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